

# EUGENIC ASPECTS OF THE WALWORTH WOMEN'S WELFARE CENTRE.

BY EDWARD FULLER

Dr. Drysdale's passing reference, in the October number of *THE EUGENICS REVIEW*, to the Birth Control Centre at East Street, Walworth (the Walworth Women's Welfare Centre), invites some detailed account of this pioneer effort to bring within access of the poor, knowledge which may enable them to restrict their families within such limits as may be prescribed by their circumstances. With but two years' history to look back upon—the Centre was opened, largely through the efforts of Dr. and Mrs. Drysdale, in November, 1921—it is not possible to draw conclusions as to the eugenic value of the work, but there is sufficient evidence to show that it has a eugenic tendency, at least in restricting reproduction from certain bad stocks and in circumstances in which, from temporary causes, parenthood is not to be desired.

Take, for example, the case of inmates of Mental Hospitals suffering from intermittent insanity. It is now a well-established practice on the part of the Medical Superintendent of at least one Mental Hospital in the London area, to send his women patients, in suitable cases, on discharge, to the Walworth Centre for instruction in the practice of contraception. The patients come willingly, often with their husbands, and are armed against the possibility of producing feeble-minded or lunatic offspring. Ultimately, it is to be hoped, contraceptive instruction will be available in the Mental Hospitals themselves—for this would appear to be a logical sequence of treatment—but meanwhile, a social service of high value is being performed by the Walworth Women's Welfare Centre in making this advice available for all ex-patients of Mental Hospitals who seek it.

It may be remarked that special emphasis is laid, at the Centre, on the joint responsibility of husband and wife in parenthood or absence from parenthood. There are, occasionally, cases where the woman comes, furtively, without her husband's knowledge, to arm herself against his brutal advances. One such case, of recent date, comes to mind: A woman, still in the early thirties and with eight children, who had been so ill-treated by her husband that she had secured a conviction for assault against him, with two months' imprisonment. The occasion of the assault had been the wife's refusal to allow him his "conjugal rights," for she knew, from bitter experience, that intercourse meant certain pregnancy. But such cases are rare. The monthly meetings for men—husbands of the women who have been treated at the Centre—and the Men's Propaganda Committee, which is carrying the message of Birth Control into scores of offices and work-

shops, Trade Union lodges and clubs, bear witness to the fact that, over this question of family limitation, there is, in many cases, agreement between husband and wife.

This is as it should be. On economic grounds alone, these people are condemned to a low standard of parenthood. By dint of great devotion—which many of them exhibit—and with the good fortune of keeping in regular employment, they can bring up one child, perhaps two children, in conditions of moderate decency and with a fair chance of their becoming useful citizens. But more than that they dare not produce. Analysis of 100 recent cases, taken consecutively from the record cards at the Walworth Centre, shows an average income of 54s. per week in a series ranging from 70s. (an exceptionally high figure) to as low as 25s.—and this average does not include the many cases of unemployment in which the only income is the Government dole. A poignant case of prudent though, in the event, unsuccessful deliberation in parenthood comes to mind. A young clerk and a typist had married, with the intention of rearing a family, when their home was established and the husband's position assured. Meanwhile, the girl proposed to keep on with her work to increase the family exchequer so that the children, when they came, might have a better chance in life than their parents had. Alas! Their knowledge of the art of contraception was imperfect and, when the girl came to the Walworth Centre, of which she had only just heard, it was found that she was pregnant, and, to add to their distress, the husband was thrown out of employment unexpectedly at about the same time.

It must be remembered, however, that the Walworth Centre does not touch the worst cases. It argues a certain degree of self-respect, foresight and social conscience for a woman to make the effort to visit the Centre. Many of those who come obviously take a pride in doing the best they can for the children they have and, for their sakes, are anxious not to have more. The patients come from all parts of London and even from the provinces, but for every woman who visits the Centre, there are probably twenty others, in the poverty-stricken and congested slums in its immediate vicinity, who do not trouble to seek the help it can afford. From the point of view of the future of the race, this is a disheartening fact which must be faced. An isolated voluntary Centre, like that at Walworth, though it does admirable work, does not touch the vast mass of careless reproduction which is filling the world with degenerates and burdening the future with unemployables. It does not touch the slum dwellers who, with no food, no fire, no work and no money even to spend on the small and transient comfort that the beer-shop affords, find, in sexual relations, their only release from depression, and they indulge themselves, careless of the fact that, months afterwards, they will have to shoulder the burden of maintaining another little life.

Since its inception the Centre has dealt with over 2,000 separate cases each case entailing two visits, sometimes more. The Centre is maintained solely by voluntary effort, without any grant from public funds.

The Centre has a eugenic tendency, though a somewhat negative one, in yet another way. It is found that a large proportion of the

older women who come for advice have been in the habit of bringing on miscarriages by the use of drugs and in other ways—invariably with injury to themselves as individuals and as mothers. Of the 100 cases quoted above, 34 women had had miscarriages, some of them two, three and four each. Birth Control—more properly, Conception Control—tends to prevent these voluntary (and criminal) abortions, with all their evil effects on the individual and, potentially, on the race. Even to the incorrigibly fertile, the contraceptive advice given and the methods advocated at the Walworth Centre hold out some hope—though emphasis is laid on the fact that no absolute temporary preventive of conception has yet been discovered. Three such cases stand out in the 100 under review: (a) Twelve children, born respectively in 1906, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 18, 19, 21, 23, with a miscarriage in 1920. Three of the children died in infancy and one in early childhood. (b) Fourteen children, born respectively in 1902, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 14, 17, 18, 20, 22, and pregnant again on examination at the Centre. There had also been one miscarriage, and of the 14 children born, seven had died, all in infancy. (c) Seven children, born respectively in 1912, 13, 15, 17, 19, 21, 22. This case was sent to the Centre by a Poor Law Guardian in the country. It is to be noted that, in the former two cases—and in countless others not here considered—the only rest which the women had from child bearing was during the husband's absence on war service. It is hoped that, even in such prolific cases, the methods of contraception advocated at the Walworth Women's Welfare Centre will, at least, secure a better spacing of births, with consequent advantage to both mothers and children.